

Thinking Processes in Middle School Students

Caryn Matsuoka

The current trend in American educational reform is directed to standards-based curriculum and assessment. One outcome of this effort is that a great deal of attention is paid to the summative assessment of students toward the end of each school year. At many schools this had led to a focus on the mastery of content and in teaching to the test. At Waikīkī School, the focus is different. The school is committed to two related programs—Habits of the Mind and Philosophy for Children Hawai‘i (p4c Hawai‘i)—to teach thinking processes directly to their students. It’s not that Waikīkī School students don’t learn the relevant content. Instead, the thinking processes are the vehicle through which the content is delivered. The students learn the standards-based content by engaging in activities that provide them with opportunities to make meaning of the content and to use it to draw their own conclusions. The goal of the school is directed to processes rather than content and to encouraging students to ask questions, explore problems, and make thoughtful decisions.

As part of my doctoral program at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, I conducted a study to determine whether and how former sixth-grade students at Waikīkī School were using the thinking processes and strategies they were taught in elementary school when they were in middle school (Matsuoka, 2007). In order to find this out, I interviewed eight former students who had graduated from Waikīkī Elementary School in the 2002–2003 school year. The students participated in a total of seven focus-group interview sessions with me towards the end of the 2003–2004 school year. At the end of each session, I asked students to write down additional thoughts and ideas in a reflection journal. Of the eight focus-group participants, three were selected for follow-up interviews to provide more in-depth data. I also interviewed parents and teachers of the three students to get their input.

Effectiveness of Habits of the Mind and Philosophy for Children Hawai‘i

In analyzing the data from my interview transcripts, I discovered that the students had retained some of the p4c

Hawai‘i vocabulary that they had learned in elementary school. This vocabulary was an essential part of the problem-solving processes that we had taught in the Habits of the Mind and the p4c Hawai‘i programs. These were the concepts that had helped set the groundwork for the students to become more skillful problem solvers and decision makers.

In addition, students were able to describe occasions after they had left elementary school in which they had used the concepts they had been taught. Several related personal stories in which they had used Habits of the Mind and Philosophy for Children Hawai‘i concepts in order to think through the consequences of their actions and make informed choices. One of the participants, Adrian, described a situation when she had to make a decision regarding the issue of smoking, and she related, “we went camping and they were asking me if I wanted to smoke and stuff and so I kind of like used the STARS, I stop and I think and I acted by saying no and I reviewed what my mom told me, like consequences might happen if you do certain stuff. I was like, no, thank you” (Matsuoka, 2007, pg. 223).

An important finding of the study was that although there were times that the students used the *thinking processes* to make decisions that led to positive consequences, there were also times when they used Habits of Mind and p4c Hawai‘i concepts to excuse or rationalize negative behavior. Though the students did talk about using Habits of the Mind and p4c Hawai‘i to make informed decisions, not all of these stories demonstrated that the students were engaging in problem solving or making the right decisions about their actions. Some of the choices that participants made were unethical, immoral, or illegal. One of the participants, Conner, described a situation in which he stole a bus pass from one of his peers because his peer would not leave him alone after he told him to go away. Conner believed that taking his peer’s bus pass was an appropriate behavior because the other student had given him a reason to, and he said, “if these people left me alone, I wouldn’t be doing any of those things.” Conner believed in fairness, and he felt that he would accept the consequences if he were the one

who was causing the trouble to his peers, and he explained, “Aww, cause in that case, if I do something first, he can get back at me” (Matsuoka, 2007, pg. 225).

People often look for reasons when something has happened to provide justification for taking action. Sometimes this is an effort to rationalize the action—to make an excuse for doing something when we know it is wrong. However, both Habits of the Mind and p4c Hawai‘i require students to go deeper. They teach that simply providing a reason is not enough. Students are encouraged to ask themselves whether the reason is a good one or if it is simply an excuse for poor behavior.

The opportunity to practice inquiry with others helps individuals consider these situations more thoroughly and allows them to take their thinking to a deeper level. Habits of the Mind and p4c Hawai‘i incorporate this kind of activity into the curriculum. These discussions play an important role in helping students think more deeply about reasons for actions and about the consequences of their actions, their beliefs, and the decisions they make. When students share situations and perspectives in a community circle, they get to compare their ideas with those of other students and the discuss alternatives that they may not have considered. Through this self-corrective process, students help each other push their thinking further, and even revise them, in the light of better reasons.

I glimpsed this process during one of the focus-group sessions. At one point in the inquiry, in which we were examining what it meant to be bad, Conner made the statement, “on the street, it’s not wrong if you don’t get caught,” (Matsuoka, 2007, pg. 292) and several of the other participants were not content with his conclusion. They replied that certain behaviors were wrong regardless of whether the individual had been caught. They provided reasons explaining why they felt that the conduct was wrong and provided examples which took into consideration the law, knowledge of right and wrong, and what they had been taught by their families.

Brooke described a situation in which her friends had broken the law and had shoplifted from a store when she was not with them. She explained to the other participants, “I told them it was wrong, and they shouldn’t have done that” (Matsuoka, 2007, pg. 292). Adrian felt that people should just know right from wrong, and she said, “I think that doing something that you’re not supposed to be doing without

getting caught is wrong because . . . I don’t know! You just know it’s wrong” (Matsuoka, 2007, pg. 292). Later in the inquiry, Adrian made reference to learning what was right from wrong from her own family, and she explained, “I’m thinking that if you’re raised good, you would know the difference between right and wrong” (Matsuoka, 2007, pp. 293–4).

Students grow ethically by coming to see that their reasons and actions are not narrowly confined to self-interest, but that they must take into consideration the views and interests of others. Thus, they learn to reexamine and reevaluate their own beliefs in terms of an increasingly larger and broader social context—not just through their own eyes or their peer group at school but from a wider social perspective.

Internalization of Habits of the Mind and p4c Hawai‘i

An important goal of teaching and learning is the internalization of thinking processes and skills and their transferability to novel situations. By practicing activities in social situations, students come to internalize these processes so that they become more natural to them and even habitual. But what is more important is that these processes don’t become automatic and invariable, but that they are adapted for use in novel situations.

In my study, I wanted to learn if there was evidence that these students had taken the thinking processes they had learned in elementary school and had applied them in their lives as middle-school students. In the interviews and reflection journals, the students shared several examples of times that they had used many of the thinking processes to think through situations and make well-informed decisions.

During one focus-group interview session, for example, a student recognized that she had been employing the thinking processes in her life without consciously thinking about using them. She remarked, “When I do stuff, I do it just cause I think it’s right, but when I come here and I see the mindful behaviors, then I realize that I do use them, but I don’t realize that I was using them before. So I never think about using them, I just do it” (Matsuoka, 2007, pg. 229). She commented that she might have been using Habits of the Mind all of the time, but that she had only come to this realization after attending the focus-group sessions. Her reflections were one example of how students often used the

thinking vocabulary to describe situations they encountered and to explain some of their behaviors. But at another level, they appeared to have internalized the vocabulary necessary to reflect on their behavior and decisions and that the processes that the vocabulary described had become internal to their thinking.

The business of approaching challenging situations, solving problems, and making informed decisions requires that students think through these issues before taking action. Rationalizations are reasons that come after the problem, not before. Students grow ethically by learning to withhold pre-conceived judgments, work cooperatively with others, and ask questions of themselves and others. Habits of the Mind and p4c Hawai‘i teach students to pose problems, listen with empathy to other points of view, and show persistence in seeking a solution.

I found that the participants in my study used p4c Hawai‘i by creating and maintaining an intellectually safe community where they could practice inquiry on relevant and interesting topics. The students employed the Good Thinker’s Tool Kit to assist them in the inquiry process. They encouraged each other to ask questions, provide examples, give reasons, test truths, and look at assumptions being made. As we discussed p4c Hawai‘i further, the students realized that they had not forgotten the lessons they had learned in elementary school and that they had been using p4c Hawai‘i strategies to think all along about some of their personal issues.

Throughout our seven weeks together, the participants used thinking tools from the Good Thinker’s Tool Kit as we dialogued together. The participants consistently gave reasons, examples, and counterexamples. They asked each other to clarify questions, such as “What do you mean by . . . ?”, “What are they assuming?”, and “Is that true?” Their intuitive use of the Good Thinker’s Tool Kit provided the students with a means of philosophically digging deeper into the ideas they shared with each other. They did not simply accept each other’s beliefs and ideas as truth, but questioned each other in the systematic ways that they were familiar with from their elementary school program. They took the time and persisted with issues so that they could achieve a deeper and more meaningful understanding.

In summary, my study concluded that both the Habits of the Mind and Philosophy for Children Hawai‘i programs had become an integral part of the students thinking processes—so much so that the participants no longer appeared to be aware of using them. Their Philosophy for Children Hawai‘i thinking processes had become habits of their minds.

REFERENCE

Matsuoka, C. (2007). *Thinking processes in middle-school students: Looking at habits of the mind and philosophy for children Hawai‘i* (Doctoral Dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (Accession Order No. AAT 3302153).